

THE PEOPLE OF COLOR DOCUMENTARY ECOSYSTEM: ENGINES FOR A NEW AMERICAN NARRATIVE

COLOR
CONGRESS

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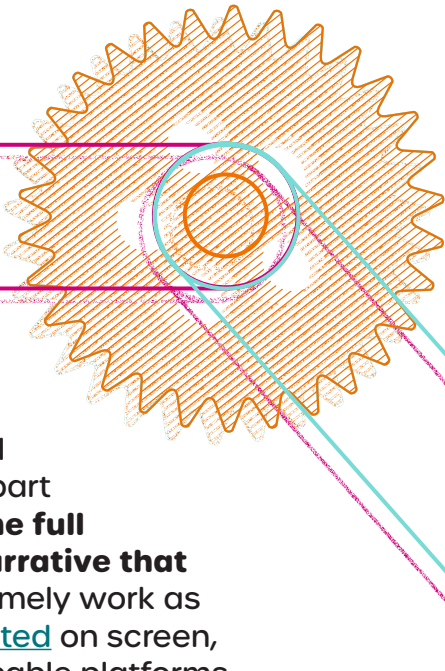
ABOUT COLOR CONGRESS

Founded in 2022, **COLOR CONGRESS** is an ecosystem builder committed to organizations led by people of color (POC) that serve nonfiction filmmakers, leaders, and audiences of color. The organizations we serve include nonprofit film festivals, artist support and narrative change organizations, micro-cinemas, filmmaker collectives, and public media entities across the United States and US islands. At Color Congress, we refer to this network of organizations as the People of Color Documentary Ecosystem, or "the ecosystem."

Operating as an intermediary, Color Congress supports, resources, connects, and champions the ecosystem through grantmaking and a free membership program. Our goal is to strengthen the organizations that serve as conduits between frontline storytellers and social movements. By building their collective power, we help these organizations reassert the power of documentary as an instrument for change. The stronger the ecosystem, the more empowered our industry is to shape narratives that advance change, contribute to national discourse in meaningful ways, and move society in the direction of pluralism and liberation.



THE PEOPLE OF COLOR DOCUMENTARY ECOSYSTEM: ENGINES FOR A NEW AMERICAN NARRATIVE



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a critical time for strengthening the underpinnings of our democratic society, and courageous, nuanced, and independent nonfiction storytelling plays a foundational part in this work. **We need storytellers of color who reflect the full diversity of society, who can shape a new American narrative that tells a new story, the true story of this country.** This is timely work as research shows people of color remain [the least represented](#) on screen, and behind the camera, on the dominant streaming and cable platforms where so many audiences see nonfiction work today.

Color Congress's 100+ member organizations are building the narrative infrastructure to make this happen. These organizations are the creative hubs that support the POC filmmakers who train their cameras on today's critical issues and produce films that fuel conversations and activity, all of which plant the seeds for a more engaged, educated, and activated citizenry. **But philanthropic support of the documentary sector has [tended to overlook](#) these POC-led field-serving organizations that have played a critical and much less visible role.**

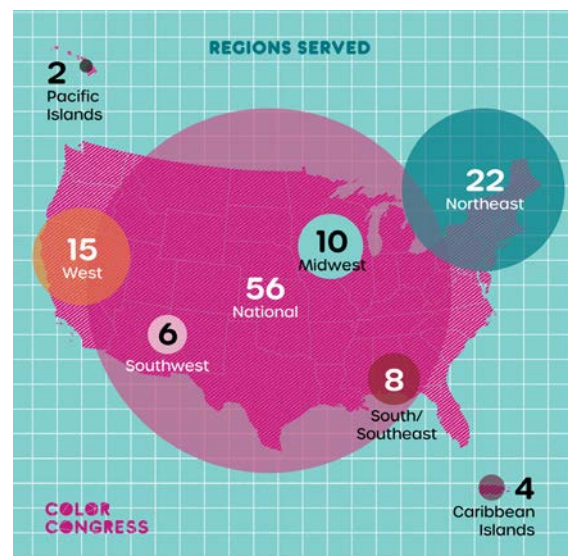
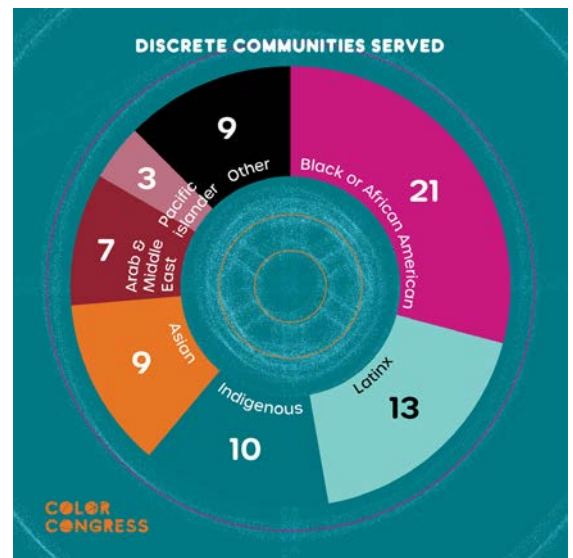
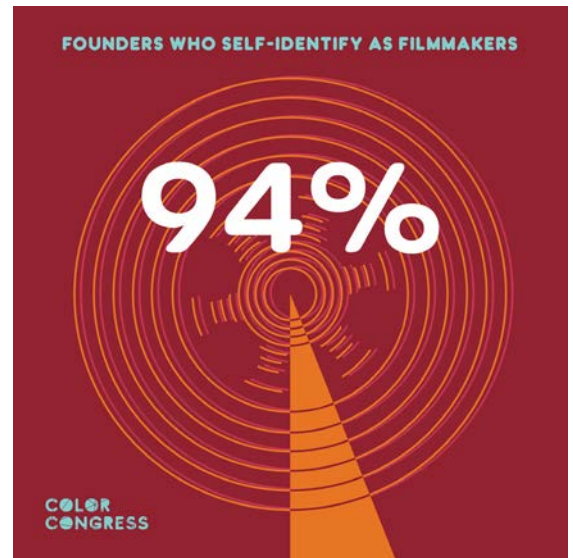
This report offers a close look at an ecosystem on the rise and a field in transition. The organizations that define Color Congress are more than drivers of diversity in the documentary sector. Rather, these organizations also create the conditions for the production of politically engaged nonfiction work that is discussed and operationalized in the service of narrative change, community healing, historical preservation, empowerment, and action.

The People of Color Documentary Ecosystem: Engines for a New American Narrative describes how disparate organizations, working together, create a web of support that provides filmmakers and audiences of color with opportunities to reshape narratives about life in the United States. Despite chronic philanthropic disinvestment and limited organizational capacity, the ecosystem has shown its capacity to thrive. In 2023 alone we estimate it collectively served:

- **More than 15,000 documentary filmmakers;**
- **More than 10,000 documentary film professionals; and**
- **More than 20M audience members.**

Data and learning culled from our membership reveal:

- **The majority of our members are founder-led, and 94% of the founders self-identify as filmmakers. Most organizations are helmed by women and women-identifying leaders.**
- **Just over half serve multiple-identity communities, while the rest focus on a particular community. The demographics most served by identity-specific organizations are Black/African/African American, followed by Latinx/Latine. Other identities supported by our member organizations include Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Asian, Arab, Middle Eastern, women and non-binary, queer, undocumented, Caribbean, Southern, Muslim, and disabled filmmakers.**
- **Just over half our members have national reach, while the rest focus on supporting filmmakers and audiences in regions or localities beyond New York and California. These include Puerto Rico, the Hawaiian Islands, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands.**
- **About one third are artist support organizations; one third focus on disseminating work and are audience-facing; and another third are collectives and networks, organizations focused on funding, and/or working to transform the documentary field in specific ways.**
- **The 2010s produced the largest percentage of new organizations. While the oldest was founded 50 years ago, the newest organization is just one year old.**



Collectively, these organizations are deeply dedicated to filmmakers of color, matching their passion and centering their identities while showing a sustained commitment to storytelling by, for, and about communities of color. These organizations are effective thanks to their founders, filmmakers of color who believe in the catalytic power of the form and created space for POC authorship and engagement, despite many obstacles in the industry.

It is our estimation that most filmmakers of color will engage with one or more of these organizations at some point in their careers, a testament to the powerful role they play in shaping the skills and sensibilities of documentarians of color.

Philanthropic partners are missing a key opportunity to reshape narratives about American life because these organizations slip through the cracks of most funder guidelines and the discrete issue areas they focus on. Examining the work of the ecosystem, we learn that filmmakers of color often focus their camera on issues that personally affect them and center communities of color as agents of history and as the primary audiences for their work. Their films challenge conventional narratives from the ground up while speaking to and across communities of color. As a result, POC-led organizations have established themselves as trusted curators and conveners who lead with care and accountability vis-a-vis the communities they serve. Trust is a vital but under-prioritized asset in today's media environment.

Even philanthropic entities that focus on shifting dominant narratives tend to rely on pop culture strategies, which, by appealing to what is popular at a particular moment, are necessarily dependent on the whims of capital-driven markets and mass commercial appeal. By complementing narrative change strategies that prioritize

scale, POC documentary organizations and the filmmakers they support serve as a critical grassroots and community-rooted ballast in a field that increasingly prioritizes audience scale and reach.

This ecosystem produces all kinds of filmmakers who produce all kinds of work, from the experimental and obscure to films with popular appeal. All five 2024 Academy-nominated short documentaries – *Island in Between*, *The Last Repair Shop*, *Nai Nai & Wai Pó*, *The Barber of Little Rock*, and *The ABCs of Book Banning* – were directed or produced by filmmakers whose voices and artistry were nurtured by our member organizations.

Independently, these organizations operate as cultural incubators, but collectively, they possess boundless narrative power. As a new ecosystem, Color Congress member organizations are now weighing how to direct that power.

Color Congress's membership program has generated new opportunities for connection, partnership, and collaboration. In just two years, members have shared about their programmatic work, the politics and aesthetic tastes of their communities, and the challenges they face as organizational leaders. Drawing on this knowledge, they articulated practical interventions to help strengthen their organizations. In 2022, leveraging an annual Field Building Fund, members directed resources to technical assistance, making it available to all. Vendors provided assistance in several areas, including fundraising and infrastructure development, impact communications and reporting, strategic planning, management training, and strategic communications.

In 2023, our members began worldbuilding, a process to envision how to collectively reshape the field according to their values and vision. Together, they identified six field interventions that represent bold, expansive solutions to shared, entrenched challenges:

- Creating infrastructure that supports collective distribution and sales;
- Experimenting with collective narrative and culture change strategies;
- Creating shared funding and grants management infrastructure;
- Building infrastructure for shared organizational marketing support;
- Building infrastructure for shared accessibility services; and
- Purchasing a dedicated retreat space.

Following an eight-month-long collective decision-making process to determine which intervention to implement using the annual fund, members decided to work on developing infrastructure for collective distribution and sales of films generated through the ecosystem.

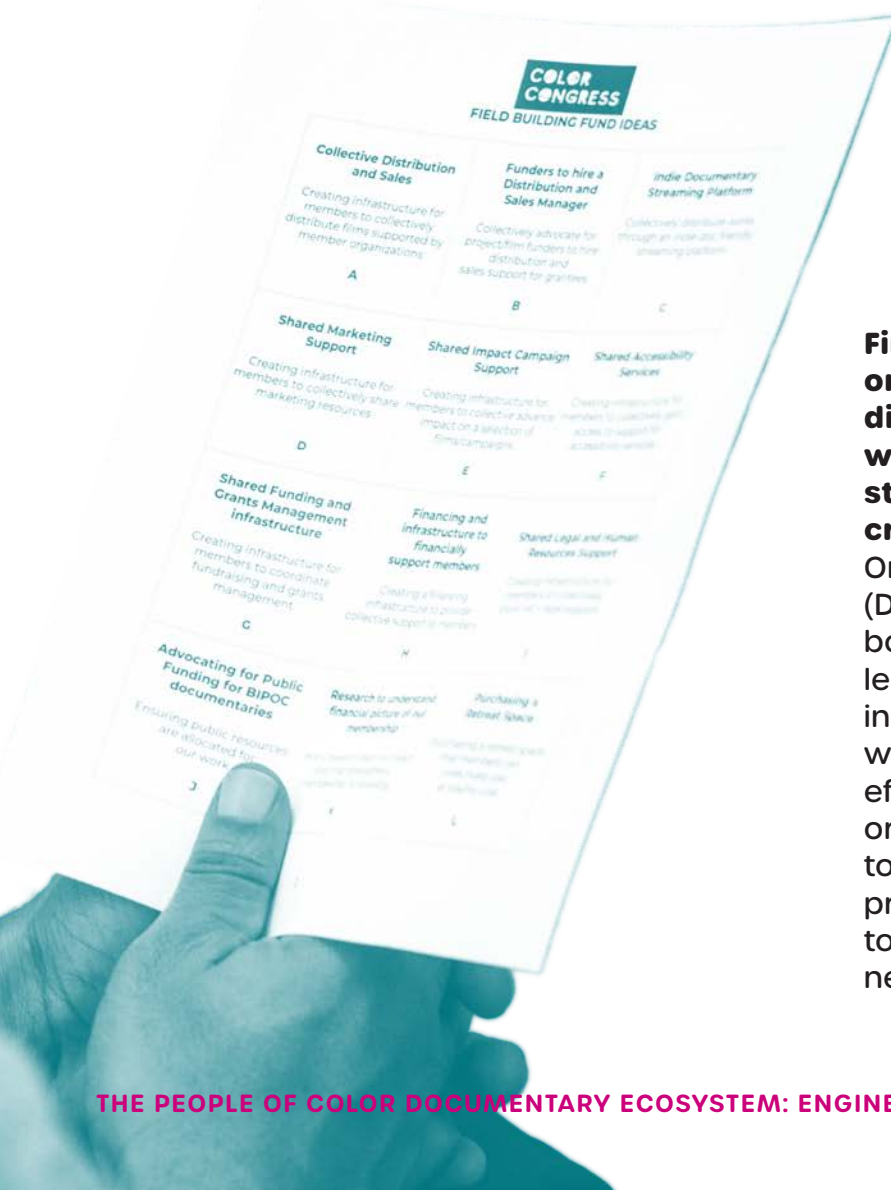
These priorities reflect growing trust and solidarity between organizations, their expanding capacity, and willingness to move together as one body to realize a more just and representative documentary field.

But this ecosystem steps into its power while facing several challenges.

Predictably, our member organizations struggle with financial instability.

- 24% of our members operate with an annual budget that is less than \$50,000.
- 17% of our members reported no full-time or part-time paid staff.
- Many organizations are fiscally sponsored, and among those, 75% have 0 paid, full-time staff.

Financial challenges notwithstanding, organizations that have championed diversity and engaged audiences with powerful films that question the status quo now find themselves in the crosshairs of legal and political threats. On the one hand, the recent wave of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) rollbacks, book bans, anti-affirmative action legislation, and anti-“woke” discourse indicates the power and efficacy of equity work. But organized attacks have a chilling effect on documentary filmmakers and the organizations that serve them, threatening to turn back the clock on decades of progress in the field. Our members continue to build the narrative infrastructure we need for a more just and equitable future



that reflects all our communities, rather than just a few. They do this despite increasing legal, political, and financial vulnerabilities and threats.

Part creative storytelling, part journalism, the documentary form has always found its way into political debate. Yet in today's polarized climate, the documentary sector has attracted renewed attention, and not for its capacity to entertain.

Although all art is inherently political due to the environment it emerges from, only some of today's nonfiction filmmakers and films are labeled "political." The true crime nonfiction genre, for example, ubiquitous on streaming and cable platforms, is not widely perceived as politically biased, despite its implicit endorsement of the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, a documentary film that examines the criminal justice system and raises questions about it is deemed political. When true crime is viewed as politically benign entertainment, and a film about mass incarceration is considered partisan advocacy, it is easy to imagine why the work emanating from the ecosystem might come under heightened scrutiny.

This report serves as an invitation to learn more about the powerful ecosystem we serve, including access to a membership database for those seeking more information. (To protect the work of our members, a password is required to access it.) We hope our partners in the philanthropic sector and beyond will explore the findings and consider funding, supporting, and protecting this growing ecosystem.

FUND

For the sectors that benefit most from documentary work, there are opportunities to invest in organizations and the burgeoning ecosystem in which they are embedded. We believe that with targeted support, we can amplify the cultural impact of the ecosystem and the filmmakers it serves. Opportunities abound to resource member organizations in direct ways, contribute to our unrestricted grant program, or address a particular Field Building Fund priority.

SUPPORT

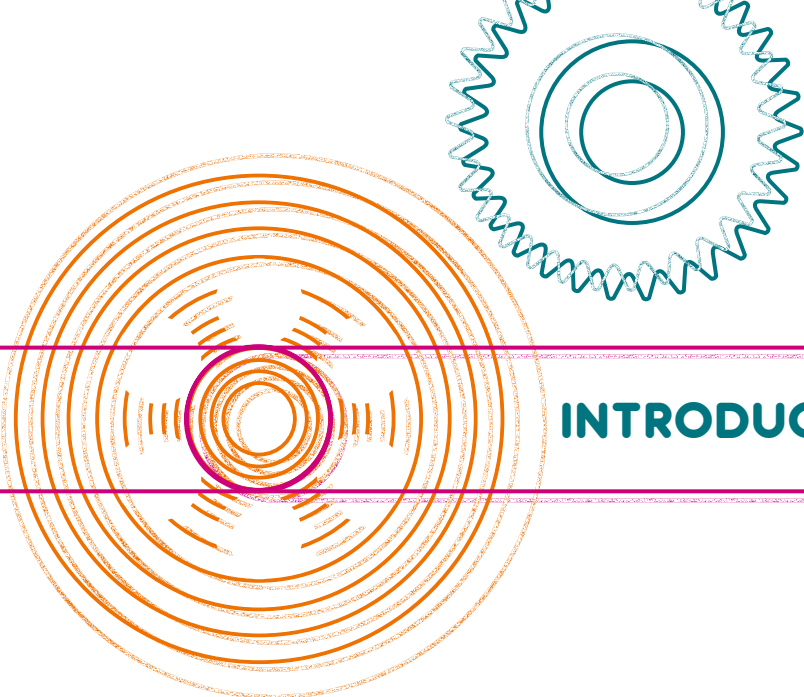
Funding the ecosystem of field-serving organizations is important, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. Philanthropy and donors might consider other resources and technical assistance, such as accessibility training, marketing and communications support, and legal advice, to strengthen our member organizations .

PROTECT

In the current political climate, comprehensive protection is vital. The political nature of the documentary form, together with the demographic makeup of our members, makes the ecosystem more vulnerable to legal attacks and economic disinvestment. We propose the creation of a working group of donors across racial justice, arts and culture, narrative change, and media and journalism, to collaborate with us to map out coordinated ways to defend the ecosystem.

A chorus of storytellers of color are shaping a new American narrative. Their work is beautiful and provocative. It is increasingly important-and under threat. Color Congress member organizations are laying the groundwork for them to succeed and thrive.





INTRODUCTION

The People of Color Documentary Ecosystem: Engines for a New American Narrative, was written and researched by Sonya Childress and Sahar Driver, the founding Co-Executive Directors of Color Congress. It describes the power of the ecosystem we serve and highlights the unique contributions of its people of color-led and -serving organizations.

The report's findings build on the Beyond Inclusion report¹ that preceded the creation of Color Congress and draws on data from 100+ people of color-led and -serving organizations, member enrollment data, member survey data, reflections from two years of closed-door member meetings, and a list of field interventions our members wish to pursue. The report paints a clear picture of our members' needs, impact, and aspirations. Color Congress is proud to present our learnings and vision alongside recommendations for how philanthropy can support our growing power and influence.

The Background & Context section on page 12 introduces readers to the history of our organization, its founding, and purpose. The Key Observations section on page 14 shares demographic data about who our members are, who and where they serve, what they do, and the particular challenges they face. It also discusses their collective vision for a reimagined documentary field and key observations about what shapes their work and how to realize this vision. The Implications & Conclusion section on page 37 offers reflections on the significance of the data and implications for philanthropy.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Color Congress's mandate to direct new resources, provide infrastructure support, and create a container for collaboration was largely informed by a groundbreaking 2019 report commissioned by Chi-hui Yang of the JustFilms portfolio at the Ford Foundation and featuring research and analysis by Sahar Driver, PhD. [Beyond Inclusion: The Critical Role of People of Color in the U.S. Documentary Ecosystem](#) surveyed approximately 200 organizations serving filmmakers of color and found that organizations launched by leaders of color with a mission to advance the work and artistry of filmmakers of color were "uniquely effective at ensuring a healthy, thriving, inclusive, and accountable media ecology."

The 2019 report described what was then a "small and loosely networked collection of entities" operating around the country. Some of these entities had ties to the commercial industry and others to public media, while most operated within the independent media sector, supported by philanthropic resources and charitable donations. Some were founded in the 1960s as activist archives modeled on the Third Cinema movement, while others emerged more recently as a result of demands for increased philanthropic investment in a diversified pipeline to the industry. Yet all of these players demonstrated a sustained commitment to the nonfiction form, to POC authorship, to creative freedom, to accountability to the communities on screen, and to engaging diverse audiences. On a practical level, these organizations served as key sites where most independent filmmakers of color could secure critical first training, mentorship, funding, exhibition, marketing, distribution, and/or employment as artists.

Remarkably, the report found that this discrete group of 90+ POC-led organizations suffered from chronic underfunding and remained largely disconnected from one another, which hampered their ability to collectively advocate for their organizations and the filmmakers and communities they served. The data revealed the need for intervention to help mitigate these challenges, an entity that could cultivate and direct new resources; provide wraparound services to ensure leaders could sustain their organizations; and support connections to build their collective power.

Color Congress launched at a moment of instability in the documentary industry. Market forces largely dominated the form, with commercial entities providing new opportunities and commercial tastes shaping curation. Sometimes the result was curatorial censorship that privileged sensational fare. In 2020, global uprisings in response to high-profile cases of police brutality continued to reshape nonprofit and corporate leadership, which began moving philanthropic resources to frontline organizations. This paradigm shift arrived just as the field emerged from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed where and how people worked and consumed media.

Envisioned as a three-year initiative, Color Congress began its [programmatic work](#) with a team of three full-time staff members. In its first year, the organization initiated a grant program to offer discrete, unrestricted, two-year, trust-based grants to organizations with the smallest budgets that had not benefited from national funding, but that supplied critical support for the documentary field and its communities. After more than 120 organizations applied to receive the funds, [17 were awarded grants of \\$45-90k, totaling \\$1.35 million](#). Data culled from the large applicant pool offered valuable insight into

the wider field we would come to serve. The grant program was followed by a free membership program, open to POC-led and POC-serving documentary organizations. Color Congress membership provided peer support, voluntary monthly closed-door meetings, and a chance to direct a member-led Field Building Fund in 2022. This Field Building Fund was intended to solve shared challenges with collectively identified solutions, arrived at through a process of strengthening relationships and trust between Color Congress members. As our membership grew to more than 60 organizations, we began devising a list of interventions organizations needed but could not afford, and that could be resourced through the \$525k Field Building Fund.

[Member organizations spent three months](#) identifying various kinds of badly needed support. The list included financial planning, fundraising, board development and governance, marketing and strategic communications, conflict resolution, leadership training, organizational planning, and organizing strategy. Color Congress staff then engaged diverse vendors who could provide support. Each member selected two offerings and received support in small cohorts, ranging between five and 20 organizations, along with individual consultations from vendors. In an end-of-year survey, **83% of members said their connection to Color Congress (e.g., as a member organization or grantee) led their organization to a stronger place.**

One member shared: We restructured our organization this year, acquired 501(c)(3) status, as well as built a new board thanks in large part to resources afforded by our partnership with Color Congress. My staff have been able to access additional resources to build skill and/or amplify their work.

Throughout the first year, our members gathered online for closed-door curated conversations about topics that affected their work in the sector. Themes ranged from the political and economic conditions affecting filmmakers in the Pacific and Caribbean islands, meaning-making on the US/Mexico borderlands, and the boundaries of Afrofuturism, to the intersectional needs of disabled filmmakers and Islamophobia in film curation. As leaders of our member organizations met, they deepened their understanding of one another's communities and the role that documentary plays in their work. Building cross-identity solidarity requires patience and sustained effort, and at monthly sessions and in cohort-based technical support meetings, members could exercise this muscle in a virtual space where they felt safe to candidly express their personal and professional challenges.

In the fall of 2023, more than 100 representatives from more than 70 member organizations met in Atlanta and online for an inaugural [National Convening](#). Over the course of two days, members discussed their vision for a reimagined documentary landscape and deliberated on a set of field interventions to reflect that vision and what their organizations would need to realize it. Similar to the 2022 Field Building Fund, members spent months considering a list of interventions to determine what the 2024 Field Building Fund should resource.

The Collective Needs and Vision section under Key Observations on page 14 discusses the outcome of this process and Color Congress's focus for 2024 and beyond.

**THE PEOPLE
OF COLOR
DOCUMENTARY
ECOSYSTEM:
KEY OBSERVATIONS**

THE PEOPLE OF COLOR DOCUMENTARY ECOSYSTEM

WHO MAKES UP THIS ECOSYSTEM?

In discussions of diversity and equity in the documentary field, focusing attention on filmmakers and their production companies seems sensible. Indeed, most field and philanthropic interventions are oriented toward identifying, training, and financing filmmakers and their production companies. However, by targeting field-serving organizations that are created to support the careers and artistry of filmmakers of color and cultivate audiences for that work, Color Congress is able to amplify the impact of documentary beyond the work of individual artists.

We distinguish between organizations founded by people of color to serve people of color, and other historically white-led organizations that also serve people of color, including some that are now led by their first leader of color. Trends show that organizations founded by people of color typically direct their service and programming to communities of color, with interventions aimed at addressing needs that go unmet in “mainstream” organizations or racialized obstacles that people of color face. But organizations established by white leaders often implicitly serve white communities, and might evolve (sometimes through pressure or financial incentives) into serving a more diverse constituency.

Despite a culturally grounded approach to nonprofit service provision, there is a [well-documented, persistent funding disparity](#) between organizations led by white leaders and leaders of color across the nonprofit sector, regardless of the communities served or the quality or length of programmatic activity.² The 2017 study *Not Just Money: Equity Issues in Cultural Philanthropy*, found that “60 percent of arts funding goes to 2 percent of the cultural institutions,” and that “people of color represent 37 percent of the population, but just 4 percent of all foundation arts funding is allocated to groups whose primary mission is to serve communities of color.” Arts organizations led by people of color, and with the explicit goal of serving the specific needs of people of color, are in some ways financially penalized for what is seen as a narrowly defined, culturally specific organizational focus. Color Congress addresses this funding disparity by supporting the ecosystem of not-for-profit organizations and formations founded and led by people of color that serves makers and communities of color through free programming.

New organizations cycle into our membership on an annual basis. To date, the Congress serves more than 100 member organizations that represent great diversity in size, programmatic work, community and regional focus, and length of operation.

LENGTH OF OPERATION

Among Color Congress members, the 2010s produced the largest percentage of new organizations. While the oldest was founded 50 years ago, the newest organization is just one year old.

The oldest member organization, Third World Newsreel, is a production training program, archive, and distributor founded in 1967 amid the protest movements of that decade. An unabashedly political organization, Third World Newsreel supports “innovative work of diverse forms and genres made by artists who are intimately connected to their subjects through common bonds of ethnic/cultural heritage, class position, gender, sexual orientation and political identification.” It also promotes “the self-representation of traditionally marginalized groups as well as the negotiated representation of those groups by artists who work in solidarity with them.”

The newest member organization, Fåha’ Digital Media, was founded in 2023 to support independent filmmakers based in the US territories of Sapan, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The founders of Fåha’ provide a filmmaker co-operative that can shape a new narrative about the history, culture, and future of island nations shaped under the weight of US military presence.

ROLES & FUNCTIONS

While many member organizations serve multiple functions, a little over one third (about 41%) identify as artist-serving organizations that focus on providing networking and professional development, training, fellowships, and mentorship opportunities to filmmakers from an array of backgrounds.

For another third (close to 36%) of member organizations, programmatic work focuses on the dissemination and showcasing of nuanced storytelling and the unique power of documentary film to educate audiences, shift narratives, and move people to action on social issues. These organizations serve as community exhibitors (the largest among them film festivals and micro- and nomadic cinemas), broadcasters, and narrative change organizations that connect documentary work to audiences of color.

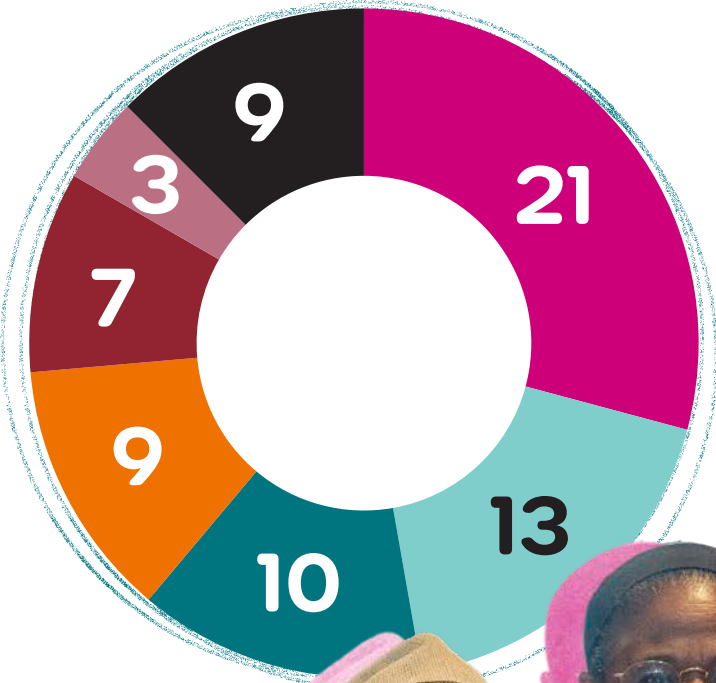
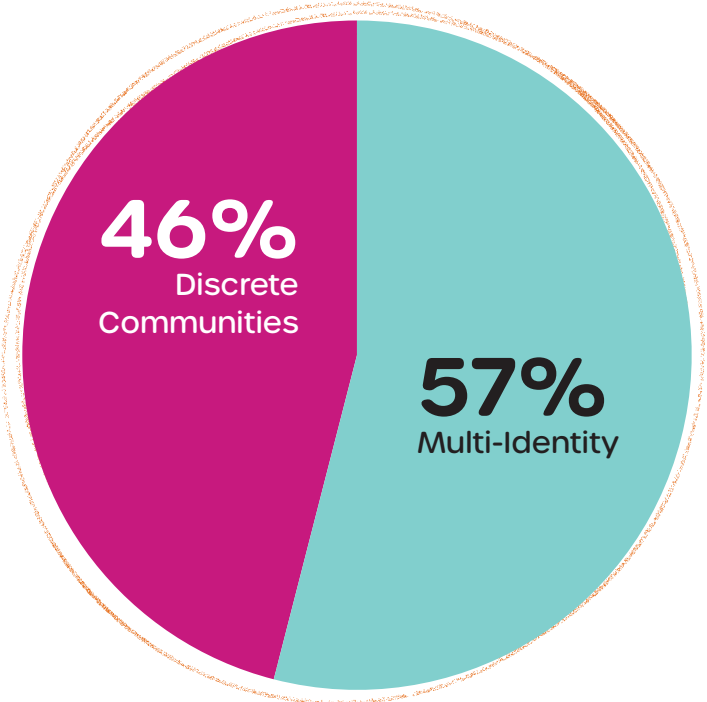
The rest of the organizations in our membership are a mix of collectives and networks, and/or organizations that focus on film criticism, research, funding, or advocating for change in the industry.

Our members are highly responsive to the filmmakers and communities they serve. As a result, the roles and functions they play and the support they offer continues to evolve. To learn more about these organizations and their work in the field, please visit our member directory.

COMMUNITIES SERVED

Most of our members serve multiple identity communities, while just under half of our members focus on specific identities.

The demographics most served by identity-specific organizations are Black/African/African American, followed by Latinx/Latine. Other identities supported by our member organizations include Indigenous, Asian and South Asian, Pacific Islander, and Arab/Middle Eastern, women and non-binary, queer, undocumented, Caribbean, Southern, Muslim, and disabled filmmakers.



- * Black or African American
- * Latinx
- * Indigenous
- * Asian
- * Arab & Middle East
- * Pacific Islander
- * Other

Note: The numbers in this graph represent the number of organizations that are dedicated to serving these communities. Many of the organizations that serve multiple-identity communities also serve these communities.



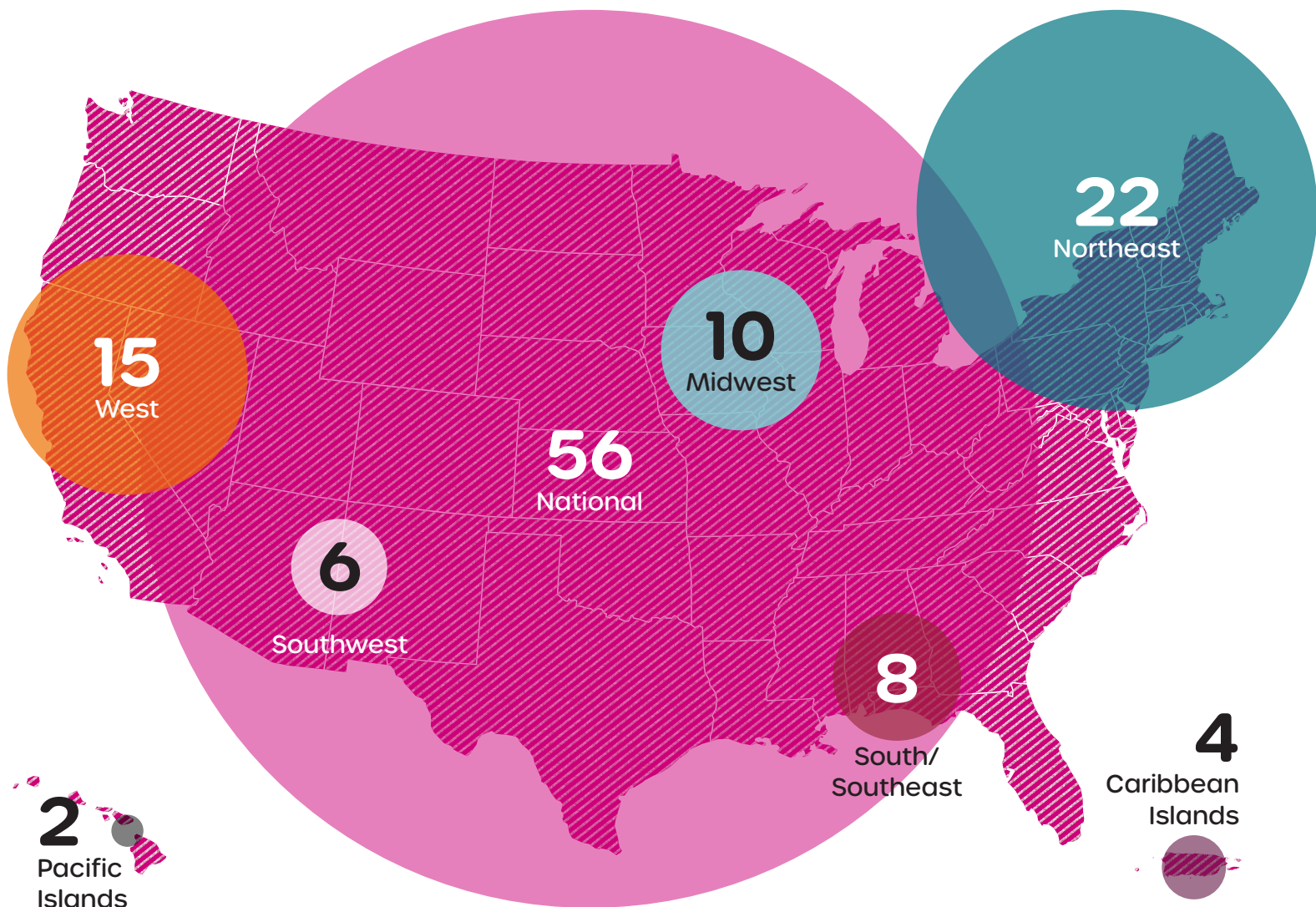
REGIONS SERVED

About 54% of our members have national reach; the rest focus on particular regions or localities. Among members with a regional focus the largest number serves the northeast region (New York City), followed by the West Coast. Other regions served by our members are the Midwest, South/Southeast, and the Southwest. Our members also represent organizations whose work focuses on the Hawaiian islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

While there are entities serving documentary makers in Alaska, the US Virgin Islands, and Samoa, we have not yet encountered any that are founded and led by people of color.

FILMMAKERS SERVED

We estimate that Color Congress members collectively served more than 15,000 documentary filmmakers, more than 10,000 documentary film professionals, and reached more than 20M audience members in 2023.³



ANNUAL OPERATING BUDGETS

The primary obstacles facing our member organizations are financial instability and insufficient resources and infrastructure to allow them to sustain their work and the scale of their activities. Based on data gathered from member surveys, an estimated 69% of Color Congress members operate with budgets under \$500,000, irrespective of the number of years they have been in operation. An estimated 78% of members operate with budgets under \$1M.

Perhaps more surprisingly, **a whopping 24% operate with a budget less than \$50,000**, and yet this subset of organizations is estimated to have served thousands of filmmakers and film professionals, and has reached more than 14k audience members. In that sense, the main limitation on their ability to increase their reach and impact is a financial one.

Color Congress member organizations continue to provide culturally competent services to artists of color while demonstrating an unwavering commitment to filmmakers and audiences of color—even when it is not politically or economically expedient.

Operating budget size of organizations.

(24%): Less than \$50,000
(19%): \$50,000 - \$99,000
(16%): \$100,000 - \$249,000
(10%): \$250,000 - \$499,000
(9%): \$500,000 - \$999,000
(12%): \$1M - \$3M
(6%): \$3.1M - \$6M
(3%) did not know

Based on responses from 63% of members

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE & LEADERSHIP

Financial precarity affects our member organizations in different ways, but in many cases, organizations direct revenue (such as corporate sponsorships, ticket sales, grants and donations, etc.) back into programming instead of staffing.

Survey responses showed that 17% of our members reported no full-time or part-time paid staff. While half of these represent collectives that mostly serve as informal support networks (such as the BIPOC Doc Editors), the other half are service providers with annual programmatic offerings. A volunteer workforce signals that leaders and unpaid staff likely financially support themselves with employment outside their work with our member organizations.

One avenue for these organizations to offer programming with unpaid or underpaid staff is seeking fiscal sponsorship, which enables them to receive tax-deductible donations and grants while outsourcing the accounting, payroll, and human resource functions to a more established entity. Survey data showed that 33% of our members are fiscally sponsored. **Among fiscally sponsored organizations, 75% have 0 paid, full-time staff. And yet we estimate that the subset of fiscally sponsored organizations that operate without paid full-time staff serves nearly 4,000 filmmakers, 2,908 documentary film professionals (e.g., editors, producers, programmers, etc.), and 74,504 audience members annually.** This suggests a pragmatic and service-oriented approach to resource management.

For most nonprofit organizations, the path to structural and financial stability is often understood as an evolution from fiscal sponsorship to 501c3 status. Fiscal sponsorship, however, provides [key benefits to grassroots organizations](#), namely, the

capacity to concentrate on programmatic work rather than operational tasks that require back office infrastructure. Organizational governance and management is labor intensive, requiring skills that are typically gained through organizational leadership, a nonprofit management degree, or mentorship.

We have found that the majority of our member organizations are founder-led, and 94% of founders self-identify as filmmakers. Our founders often explain that they created their organization in response to a challenge they experienced or saw firsthand as a filmmaker of color. Unlike executive directors who have worked their way into senior leadership roles, many Color Congress founders created an organization as a filmmaker, often without formal training, education, or mentorship in nonprofit governance. In these cases, fiscal sponsorship can alleviate the burden of organizational governance, but without properly recognizing this pragmatic, sustainable choice for artist-run organizations such as our members, founders can struggle to be taken seriously and raise enough resources to build a paid staffing structure and move into financial stability.

Another distinguishing feature of member organizations can be found in the Beyond Inclusion research, which points to the importance of “specific individuals at organizations” who play a critical role in the success of filmmakers of color. The report explains that “almost all of the people named [in interviews] were women of color.” **Color Congress member organizations are overwhelmingly led by women-identifying people.** Studies show⁴ that women of color experience racialized and gendered obstacles in the nonprofit sector that hinder their ability to advance, stabilize, or scale their organization.⁵ While leaders of color possess competencies that greatly enhance their effectiveness in serving their communities,⁶ the sector must do more to remove these obstacles and actively support their leadership.

The complex conditions in which Congress member organizations operate suggest that increased philanthropic investment solves one challenge, but stabilizing the ecosystem requires infrastructure and peer support that is best offered by an intermediary that serves multiple functions to address layered needs.



PRIORITIES & VISION

Color Congress has created a container for connection for the 100+ organizations we serve. We learn a great deal from and about our members in our highly curated, monthly closed-door meetups online and at in-person events. These gatherings feature our members as speakers, are facilitated by staff, and are supported by a team of wellness facilitators from [Lumos Transforms](#). In these conversations we have listened to the origin stories of many member organizations, learned about the communities and issues that animate their work, and seen why they serve their communities in the ways they do.

We also spend considerable time reflecting on our respective hopes for the documentary field and shaping ideas together to help our member organizations collectively achieve their aspirations.⁷ In our first year, we asked members to direct the Field Building Fund toward the primary goal of strengthening their respective organizations and addressing their technical and infrastructural needs, which we could then address in a shared resource program. Our members came up with the following list of resources, which tells us about the challenges they face.

- Fundraising and infrastructure development⁸
- Organizational strategic planning⁹
- Impact communications and reporting¹⁰
- Financial planning¹¹
- Management training¹²
- Online accessibility training and website audits¹³
- Social movements or organizing for change¹⁴
- PR and Marketing communications¹⁵
- Strategic communications¹⁶
- Leadership training¹⁷
- Ongoing legal support¹⁸
- Restorative justice and conflict management¹⁹
- National board training²⁰

For the second year, we invited members to look beyond their organizations and lean into their collective ambitions. As part of a multi-phase collective decision-making process that included worldbuilding facilitated by Karim Ahmad of Restoring the Future, our members articulated their values and vision for members and for the future of the documentary field. The following vision statement was the result:

We are committed to (re)building a documentary sector that reflects the diversity of our communities and this country. We envision a thriving sector where the barriers between filmmakers, our stories, and audiences are dismantled and where accessibility is centered. We see an abundance of resources flowing to all of our organizations and communities, and for our values of just compensation, authorship, and creative freedom to be reflected. We see a documentary field that respects the contributions and ancestral wisdom of all our communities and that supports youth and intergenerational solidarity. We want a decentralized sector made up of human-centered institutions that value process as much as product, that support the careers and well-being of the artists and leaders who make up our sector, and that reflect a culture of care, mutual support, and holistic wellness. The members of Color Congress are a community of organizations that are accountable to one another and are committed to one another's success.

This vision statement anchored our process, serving as a touchstone to ensure that our work and actions are rooted in our values and vision. Members formed working groups to discuss their ideas for achieving or getting closer to that vision, and for three months, each working group met to discuss their ideas, weighing them against the following questions:

- Does this idea align with our vision and values?
- Does this idea benefit all members?
- Is this idea time-sensitive and a priority?
- Is this idea viable at this time?

With the vision statement as a guiding light, Color Congress members spent four months whittling down a list of 21 ideas to five priority interventions they would like to realize over the next five to 10 years. Each year, members will determine which intervention they wish to prioritize. To move toward these goals, Color Congress is resourcing a \$300k annual Field Building Fund. We now need partners to help us realize the full potential of our creative approaches.

The priority interventions are:

WELLNESS & RETREAT SPACE

Members have proposed using the Field Building Fund to purchase a multi-use, wellness-centered space for organizations in the ecosystem to rest and commune. As people of color increasingly experience a cultural backlash following the reversal of affirmative action, the defunding of diversity initiatives, and greater [violence directed at their communities](#), it's understandable that our members want to create safe spaces for gathering. Members are discussing what ethical stewardship of the space, in partnership with Native communities, should look like.

SHARED FUNDING AND GRANTS MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Members have proposed using the Field Building Fund to create infrastructure for shared funding and grants management. The goal of this intervention is to ease the burden of organizational fundraising and reporting (especially for those without dedicated development staff), counter the pressure to compete with one another, and make the work of member organizations visible to potential funders and donors. They hope to find ways to coordinate joint applications for funding.

EVIDENCE-BASED NARRATIVE AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Members are eager to reshape narratives about this ecosystem of organizations and the communities it serves. They propose using the Field Building Fund to do this by producing an annual report that uplifts the special relationship between audiences of color and documentary film; share the varied ways that people of color tell stories; show the power of the documentary form to advance change; and highlight opportunities to support this work.

SHARED MARKETING

Members have proposed putting the Field Building Fund toward a shared marketing fund that would resource customized marketing materials, approaches, and outreach for Color Congress member organizations. The goal is to make visible member services and offerings to filmmakers, funders, audiences, and other interested parties.

COLLECTIVE DISTRIBUTION



Members have proposed using the Field Building Fund to support collective distribution and sales of films generated through the support of Color Congress member organizations. To achieve this, they hope to build infrastructure to collectively market those films and in doing so, amplify work by members. This would be the first phase of a multi-phased initiative focused on supporting a slate of films emerging from Color Congress in 2024-2025.

Color Congress is forging ahead with a sixth priority intervention without a vote:

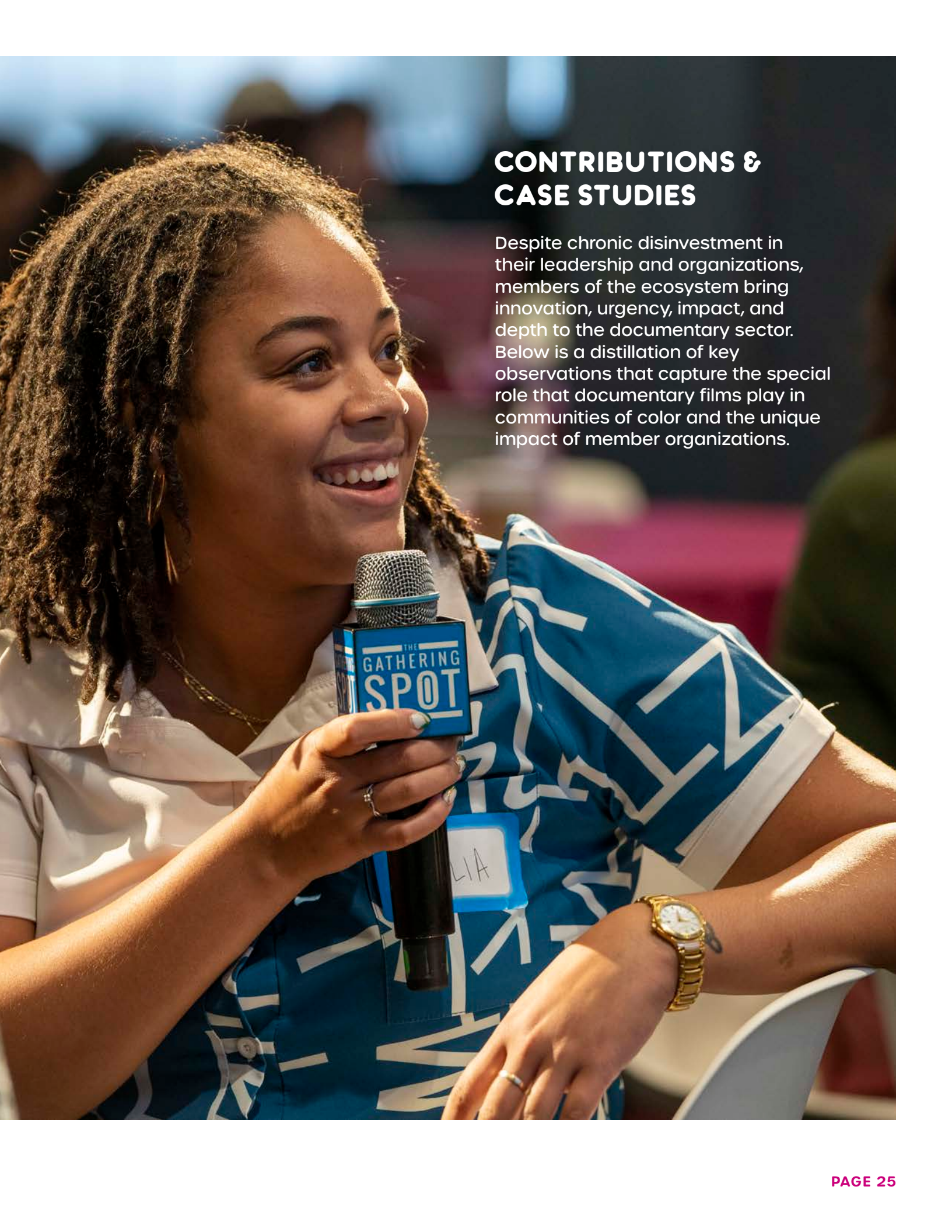
SHARED ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

Color Congress will establish a member Accessibility Fund, a pool of funds that our members can use to improve access to their organizational offerings. The primary goal is to support members to create accessible websites (i.e., for people using screen readers) and provide ASL, CART, language-interpretation services for in-person and virtual events, and strategies to increase accessibility. A longer-term goal is contributing to a cultural shift in the field that has been changing norms to make accessibility business as usual.

After months refining their ideas in working groups and discussing the benefits, prioritization, and viability of their ideas, members gathered online in January 2024 to vote on the idea they wish to resource using a \$300k Field Building Fund through a consent-based process.²¹

Members decided that their priority for 2024 will be to shape and implement a Collective Distribution and Sales solution to the current crisis in distribution that many filmmakers in the field face, beginning with a marketing experiment that supports filmmakers served by our members and from which the broader documentary field can learn.

This idea aligns with our membership's articulated collective vision of a reimagined documentary landscape. It also proves that when this ecosystem's ambitions are realized, the entire field benefits.



CONTRIBUTIONS & CASE STUDIES

Despite chronic disinvestment in their leadership and organizations, members of the ecosystem bring innovation, urgency, impact, and depth to the documentary sector. Below is a distillation of key observations that capture the special role that documentary films play in communities of color and the unique impact of member organizations.

DURABLE, COMMUNITY-LEVEL NARRATIVE CHANGE

Far too often, narrative change is framed as a recalibration of the narratives transmitted through storytelling in popular media aimed at mass audiences. What we lose in this framing is an understanding of how lasting social change happens. While it is true that organizers use tastemaker and influencer strategies to shape popular narratives and push back against power that is exerted from the top down, we also know that communities motivate and activate one another from the ground up.

Because the majority of our member organizations focus their work on specific communities of color and locally, rather than mainstream filmmakers and broad audiences, their work falls outside the typical rubric of “narrative change” work. Yet each of our member organizations, through artist support or exhibition and curatorial work, actively reframes narratives and perspectives about their communities for their communities. Instead of raising awareness of issues that are unfamiliar to audiences, or imploring them to care about a story that feels disconnected from their reality, our members employ critical base-building strategies to engage and activate the communities of which they are a part. Whether an organization programs storytelling that heals a wounded community, activates an empowered one, or both, they recognize communities of color as agents of change in their own lives, their communities, and our nation.



Comfrey Films

For some organizations and leaders, narrative change begins with the process of healing and transformation that storytellers experience while sharing their own stories. [Comfrey Films](#), founded in Durham, North Carolina in 2017, is a film training program and production house designed to launch Black trans, gender non-conforming, and intersex (TGNCI) storytellers into independent filmmaking and to tell stories woven at the intersection of being Black and TGNCI. Executive Director Joie Lou Shakur explains that their impact assessment process prioritizes the effect of their stories on storytellers “before it ever gets to larger audiences.” Comfrey Films takes care to assess

their filmmakers’ wellbeing prior to, during, and after they wrap a production, and by asking the filmmakers and crew, “How has the film been able to impact and shape the values, thriveability, and praxis of folks involved with the storytelling?”

This ground-up theory of change demands a rigorous accountability process from filmmakers. It aligns with other popular and respected leadership training programs that recognize that our future leaders find their roots in opportunities to unearth personal stories and share them in community.

As our members strengthen ties across identity, they build durable relationships that translate into real support in times of crisis, as we saw during the 2023-24 War on Gaza, as discussed below.

A recent, rapid-response symposium organized by [No Evil Eye Cinema](#) (NEEC) illustrates how member organizations serve as key sites for debate and discussion across communities of color. Led by two young activists of color, NEEC is a nomadic micro-cinema that aims to redefine the creative and social parameters of film scene(s) by curating an eclectic mix of films and accessible educational workshops made for and by inclusive audiences.

Their virtual symposium, [Cinematic Interventions to Freeing Palestine and the Global South](#), was organized during Israel's War on Gaza in the fall of 2023. The event asked participants, "What is our role as film and culture workers during moment(s) of genocide and censorship in Gaza and beyond?" Simply hosting this event during a time of deep political division within the film sector, and considering the very real threat of censorship and philanthropic divestment proved a bold and courageous act. In just two weeks' time, the organization was able to secure prominent filmmakers and professionals of color in the documentary sector as speakers and reached more than 1,500 people for the live symposium. The group noted: "This is testament to how necessary these conversations are and what it means to lean in on community during times of repression."

The NEEC-led symposium was also significant for the links it established between the War on Gaza and imperialistic wars in Congo, Sudan, Tigray, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. What became clear is that organizations led by people of color are often at the forefront of cross-racial solidarity work that deepens ties across communities that are often pitted against one another. A core value of the Color Congress is to recognize diversity among our communities, without flattening differences, and this value shows up frequently in the work of members who intentionally build partnerships across identity to strengthen their collective power.

This example shows the many ways that proximity to one another develops into conversations and storytelling that advances or shapes more sophisticated, nuanced narratives about the communities we collectively represent. It is during these activities and in these moments that we begin to understand the ecosystem's narrative power.



DOCUMENTARY FILM HOLDS UNIQUE POWER FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

In communities of color, documentary films serve as a powerful conduit for correcting distorted narratives and challenging official accounts of events; elevating stories of resilience, dignity, courage and joy; advancing social justice goals; and catalyzing introspection and healing for filmmakers, film participants, and their communities.

The documentary form has long been associated with the power to educate and engage, but in the streaming era, the form is more likely to serve as entertainment. From the celebrity exposé to true crime investigations, documentary is now valued for its ability to transcend the staid image of yesterday, entertaining rather than educating. For our members, however, documentary films are the chosen vehicle for catalyzing impact at many levels.

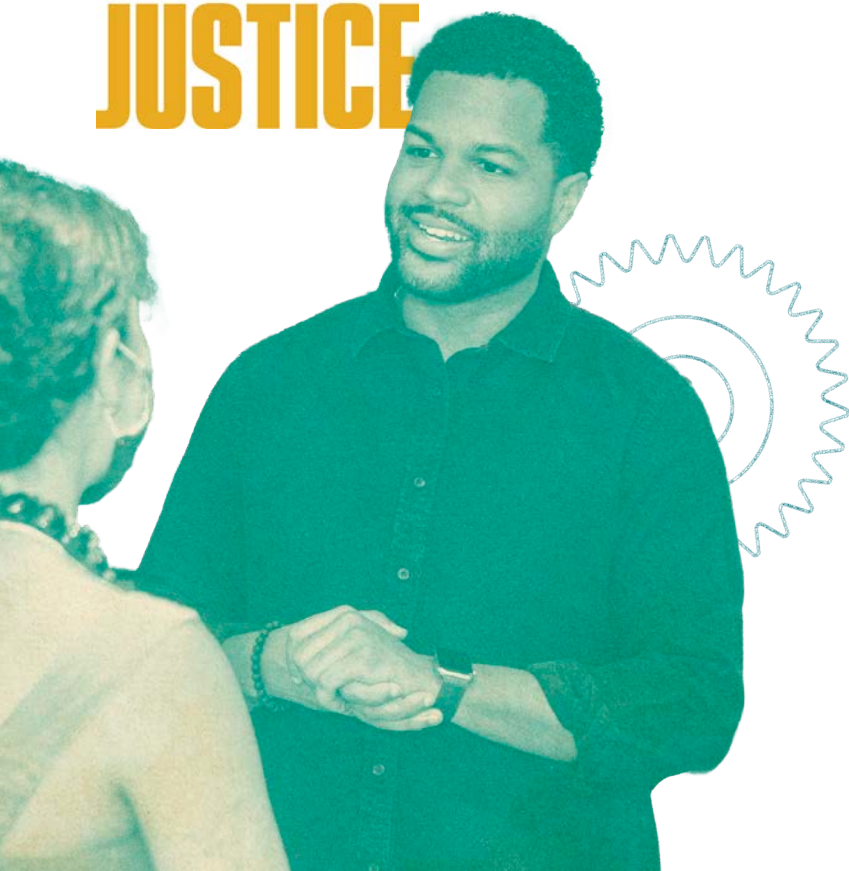
We often observe filmmakers of color training their cameras on issues that personally affect them, and hope to put those films in the hands of organizers and activists who share their engagement in the same issues. Just as filmmakers of color often tell stories from a place of proximity, member organizations also share a proximity to the same issues and communities they focus on. For our members who focus on reaching audiences, they were created to connect those films to the communities that need to see them. These are often audiences of color. For that reason, we hear reticence among member organizations to engage with filmmakers who claim to “speak for the voiceless,” or support films that frame entire communities using the lens of trauma and victimhood. Our member organizations are deeply connected with communities of color and aware of the tastes and preferences for nonfiction work that uplifts, educates, examines, and heals.

A powerful example can be found in the work of [Represent Justice](#), which turns stories into action to change the US justice system. Many film organizations support makers who examine the flaws of the justice system, but what sets apart Represent Justice is their belief in the documentary form as a pathway to empowerment and activism for individuals impacted by the carceral system. With its keen understanding of the transformative power of authorship and its analysis of the importance of trusted messengers to shift narratives and catalyze action, Represent Justice aims to build a critical mass of system-impacted storytellers. These trusted messengers use film and media to mobilize audiences to take action and transform the legal system. Their work represents a long-term investment in narrative, cultural, and structural change around the criminal justice system, while ensuring that the people most impacted by that system reap the benefits of this storytelling in the short term. By shifting the emphasis from changing the hearts and minds of mainstream audiences to ensuring that media about systems-impacted individuals will benefit those people, the organization performs an exercise in accountable filmmaking. It employs a [Results Based Accountability](#) framework that forces the organization to ensure that its methodology is rigorous and produces tangible outcomes for those at the center of the stories and issues.

WE BELIEVE THAT IT'S IMPORTANT TO RAISE STANDARDS OF AUTHORSHIP IN THE DOCUMENTARY INDUSTRY AROUND COMMUNITY STORYTELLERS OF COLOR HAVING CONTROL, ACKNOWLEDGMENT, MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT, AND ACCESS TO OTHER TOOLS DURING THE FILMMAKING AND DISTRIBUTION PROCESS. AS SUCH, WE'VE LAUNCHED OUR VERY FIRST OPEN CALL PROCESS TO SUPPORT FILM PARTICIPANTS AS STORYTELLERS AND TO RAISE THE STANDARDS OF CARE AND OWNERSHIP IN THE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BEING MADE ABOUT FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS AND THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM, DISPROPORTIONATELY PEOPLE OF COLOR.

- Daniel Forkkio, Executive Director

**REPRESENT
JUSTICE**



Represent Justice led the impact campaign for the film *Sansón & Me*, which tells the story of Sansón, an undocumented Mexican immigrant from a small California town sentenced to life in prison without parole, and filmmaker Rodrigo Reyes, Sansón's court interpreter. Though Sansón was unable to attend film events because of his incarceration, Represent Justice created opportunities for people currently incarcerated to connect their stories with communities beyond prison walls. The organization identified surrogates for Sansón and connected him via Skype to other incarcerated people who can build on his story to share their voices. A participant at a screening inside the Central California Women's Facility shared their reflections:

We all could relate to your story. It brought a lot of memories from my past. This film gave back Sansón his identity, instead of being a number. - Attendee incarcerated at Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, CA

For the [SF Urban Film Fest](#) (SFUFF), community preservation and agency are the superpowers of the documentary form. SFUFF gathers a diverse, engaged audience and uses the power of storytelling to spark discussion and civic engagement around urban issues. Led by founder and filmmaker, Fay Darmawi, SFUFF platformed a 45-minute documentary film that was conceived in collaboration with the SOMA Pilipinas Cultural Heritage District (SOMA Pilipinas) in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood and directed by Fay with two Filipina filmmakers, Dyan Ruiz and Nix Guirre, as co-directors. The film, *Sa Amin: Our Place*, tells the story of decades of organizing, community planning, and cultural contributions by the Filipino American community in the South of Market (SOMA) district, despite urban renewal and tech-fueled real estate speculation. As part of the filmmaking process, the crew researched archives at the public library and the University of California (UC) Library system and uncovered archival footage and 1970s audio files by the late Filipino documentarian Sam Tagatac at the UC Santa Barbara Library. This archival footage made its way into the film, and was later digitized and made available as a permanent feature of a statewide digital archive.

THIS ARCHIVE IS SIGNIFICANT BECAUSE IT SHOWS THE FILIPINO COMMUNITY, WHICH HAD A SIGNIFICANT WAVE OF IMMIGRATION IN THE LATE 1960S, HAD ALREADY STARTED ORGANIZING AND UNDERSTOOD THE IMPENDING TRAUMATIC IMPACT OF URBAN RENEWAL IN THE YERBA BUENA DISTRICT ON THEIR GROWING COMMUNITY. THE SAM TAGATAC ARCHIVES CONTRIBUTE SIGNIFICANTLY TO UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA AND FILIPINO AMERICAN HISTORY AND CURRENT STRUGGLES.

- Fay Darmawi, Founder and Executive Director

SF **URBANURBANURBAN** FILM FEST



THE PEOPLE OF COLOR DOCUMENTARY ECOSYSTEM: ENGINES FOR A NEW AMERICAN NARRATIVE

POC-LED DOCUMENTARY ORGANIZATIONS ARE TRUSTED CURATORS AND CONVENERS

These examples point to both a deep connection and accountability to communities of color, not as target audiences that hold monetary value, but as the primary sources and audiences for powerful storytelling.

What we find is that POC-led documentary organizations prioritize care and concern for communities of color, cultivate them as audiences for nonfiction, and possess time-tested, sophisticated strategies to engage them. Communities of color now represent a growing majority of media consumers in the United States, but a recent study on documentary filmmaking and distribution in the streaming era found that “across platforms, primary on-screen protagonists are more likely to be White and men.” When white filmmakers hold the camera, communities of color largely remain absent or marginal to the story, and communities of color are not understood, prioritized or recognized by entities that market, curate, and distribute those films.

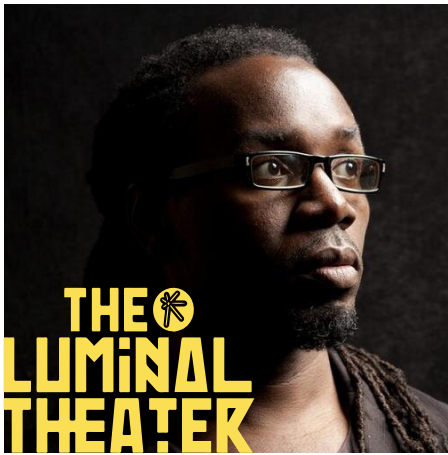
That a relatively small number of documentary organizations reached an estimated 20 million people with documentary filmmaking by and for people of color in 2023 alone speaks to what is possible when leaders of color are at the helm and audiences of color are prioritized. More remarkable than the numbers reached is the quality of that engagement and the curatorial care that reflects great cultural sensitivity.



Niketa Reed is the Founder and Executive Director of [Arkansas Soul Media](#), which offers a digital media platform geared toward BIPOC—primarily by BIPOC—in Arkansas. The organization fosters trust among the communities of color it serves by having established an advisory board to craft a code of ethics with policies that inform its content. It holds its programmatic work to a standard that requires that it must always “serve local/regional communities of color and represent their best interests given the data they have at hand.”

Serving the emotional needs of communities of color animates Curtis John, Co-Founder and Executive Director of The [Luminal Theater](#), a nomadic cinema that brings Black film straight to the people. Recently,

John and his wife/partner purchased 22 acres in Columbia, South Carolina that [“aspires to be a place of refuge for the urban weary, a site of Black cultural production, presentation, and community.”](#) Their cinematic programming offers a site for rest, care, camaraderie, safety, and healing for a Black community under siege following global uprisings and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their curatorial lens is guided by a desire to provide spaces for connection between generations of Black audiences in South Carolina and beyond.



John's decision to create a nomadic cinema sprang from the realization that the typical spaces for independent film were unfamiliar and unfriendly to his community. He says, "I think we as cinephiles don't realize this, but a lot of audience members who these filmmakers are trying to reach, and we want to reach as well, really see art houses as places of privilege." This led to an epiphany.

He thought: "Why not bring the films directly to our audiences? So being mobile, being nomadic allowed us to really do that. And so we connected with a lot of different spaces. Our

favorite thing is working with community gardens because there is that similarity in where people don't, especially in bigger spaces, feel these green spaces - community gardens- are for them. In the same way that people felt that certain films, especially independent films, don't speak to them. Why not let's be that bridge? Let's create these experiences, these shared audience experiences in these spaces. And so people feel these films are for them and these spaces are for them."



Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, the founder of Puerto Rico-based solar cinema, [Cine Solar Rodante](#), echoes a desire to create spaces for communities of color to come together, build a shared political analysis, and contemplate their collective power. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, the Cali-Rican filmmaker arrived on the island with "a small solar generator, a projector and speakers and went town to town" in communities still without electricity. Screenings were a space for neighbors to reconnect after the disaster and consider the path forward. He recounts his curatorial decisions in this way: "We [screened films with] survival stories, stories of the Gulf, of Katrina, so we could learn from what happened outside to teach us what was happening in our recovery process."

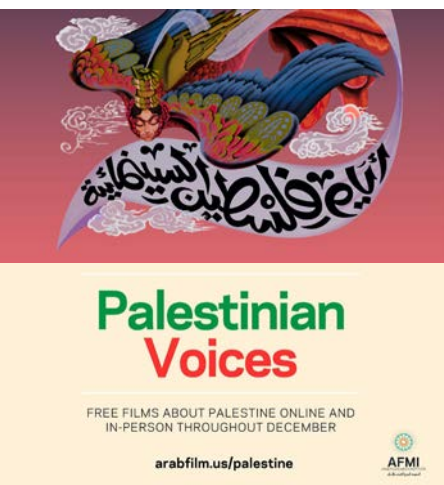
Now an established solar cinema program, Jacobs-Fantauzzi and his colleagues disseminate work across the archipelago, focusing on films that emphasize agency, community activism, and successful organizing. When conflicts arise between local communities and the government, or between commercial interests that contribute to the island's gentrification, they set up an impromptu solar screening of a film that is sure to animate the community and strengthen its resistance. By responding to the political and economic climate, Cine Solar has become a trusted exhibitor of nonfiction content for Boricuas.

THE VAST POWER OF A DECENTRALIZED NETWORK

Through relationship building and solidarity work, we are developing a powerful network of POC-led documentary organizations. Sometimes the work of this network is visible, while at other moments, the network operates and evolves beneath the surface.

Indeed, most of the work of the Color Congress in the last two years has taken place behind closed doors. Our members meet in a private monthly Zoom that is never recorded to ensure that members can speak candidly and feel trust. We understand how this stance might seem counterintuitive, given that our goal is to increase the visibility of the ecosystem. Yet the Color Congress is an emerging network that is still building relationships across organizations and communities. And trust building takes time and care to develop and mature.

Community-based organizations that are distinct from one another and yet networked and in relationship, are worth the time and effort it takes to build them. A new model of decentralized networks that meet discrete needs and communities promotes a thriving, evolving, and sustainable field.



In a fully mature network, allied organizations can activate in unison in moments of crisis or opportunity. That may involve joint fundraising toward a common goal, or rapid response work during a calamity. Like the example from No Evil Eye Cinema, the [Arab Film and Media Institute](#) moved into rapid-response mode in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel. Forced to cancel its popular annual Arab Film Festival, the organization pivoted to support [Palestine Cinema Days](#), an in-person and virtual festival of Palestinian films organized by Film Lab Palestine. Thanks to trusted Color Congress relationships, countless member organizations rallied quickly to collaborate on in-person screenings in [Chicago](#), [Philadelphia](#), [San Francisco](#), and [New York City](#),

as well as [virtual screening](#) events, while the Arab Film and Media Institute launched a month-long series of free screenings called [Palestinian Voices](#). Work that began as a base-building effort among Arab and Muslim communities created pathways to engage other communities of color in awareness and allyship. When we invest in a network's infrastructure, it can mobilize quickly and without resistance.

Perhaps even greater potential lies within networks such as the 100+ Color Congress member organizations connecting with other mobilized networks, or the reparations organizations resourced by [Liberation Ventures](#), the network of movement organizations supported by the [Southern Power Fund](#), and the leaders and organizations operating under the umbrella of the [Intercultural Leadership Institute](#). We can envision a world where our members build a bridge to other networks that represent communities of color, thereby strengthening grassroots movements and communities as we confront unprecedented challenges in our nation.

POC-LED ORGANIZATIONS FORM A CRITICAL WEB OF SUPPORT

Documentary filmmaking, even in an increasingly commercial environment, remains an economically unstable profession. The People of Color Documentary Ecosystem functions as a web of support for filmmakers of color. Each organization in this ecosystem provides unique support based on its areas of expertise and other financial and in-kind resources for filmmakers of color throughout their careers.

Set Hernandez, the recent recipient of the Truer Than Fiction Award for their film *Unseen* at the Film Independent Spirit Awards (February 2024), offers a case study in how a single filmmaker can be served by a host of organizations over the course of their career. The organizations that supported Hernandez speak to various intersectional identities so the filmmaker can show up as their authentic self.

ARTIST SUPPORT & MENTORSHIP:

Visual Communications (VC) understands the value of culturally responsive support and was one of the earliest supporters of Hernandez's career. At VC events, they gained the confidence to pick up a camera. Their Filipino identity was nurtured in this community and they began to trust their own voice as a storyteller.



IMPACT TRAINING & A NETWORK:

Firelight Media provided a space for Hernandez to apply their organizing skills to film as a fellow in their Impact Producer training program. The program helped to closely connect Hernandez to a broader POC filmmaker network and eventually to gain recognition and validation as a serious documentarian. In a shared space with other filmmakers of color, they began to sharpen their understanding of how they navigate a field that is often hostile to filmmakers who lead with their identity and politics.



FUNDING & EXPERTISE:

AXS Lab came in to support Hernandez's most recent project, *Unseen*, about Pedro, an aspiring social worker who faces restrictions as a blind, undocumented immigrant, to obtain his college degree. AXS Lab understands the need to produce work and reach audiences with disabled people centered as makers and audiences. Their support of Hernandez's film helped create the conditions for an approach that would be accountable to the disabled community.



A COLLECTIVE:

Undocumented Filmmakers Collective, a collective that Hernandez co-founded with other undocumented filmmakers, created a safe space for members to get organized and self-advocate in a field accustomed to putting undocumented people in front of the camera as the subjects of documentaries but not behind them as storytellers. The organization's advocacy resulted in new avenues of funding that had been unavailable to undocumented filmmakers due to legal barriers.



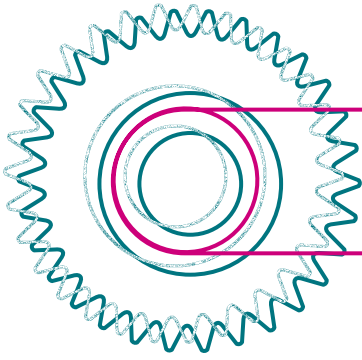


What we have seen is that behind every talented filmmaker lies an ecosystem that supports their creative vision. Most filmmakers of color work their way through many of our member organizations, receiving training, support, networking, funding and platforming, all from culturally rooted frameworks.

Altogether, these organizations and the people who make them have formed a web of support consisting of trusted peers, champions, and mentors, whom Hernandez and other filmmakers can turn to again and again throughout their careers. This invisible web of support for filmmakers of color is under-articulated and underexplored.







IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

What we have learned in our first two years at Color Congress is that members who make up the ecosystem value authorship, intersectional diversity, equity, accessibility, care, and accountability. They are community-centered and offer support to filmmakers of color and curate for audiences of color in ways that are accountable to communities and foster trust. Their values-driven, mission-oriented, and culturally sensitive support provides unequalled support for documentary filmmakers of color who will go through at least one of these organizations at one or more points during their careers.

Filmmakers of color tend to train the camera on issues that personally affect them. So the issues they make films about resonate with communities with similar experiences. The nuanced, intimate stories they tell are relatable and create trust among audiences. Collectively, these stories contribute to a historical record that centers people of color as agents of change and the makers of history, not simply the subjects of history. In this way, the documentary form helps create a fuller and more accurate historical record. Media that offers an honest understanding of history and the present, shown in compelling ways by trusted messengers, is a fundamental tool for social transformation.

The organizations that make up the ecosystem are underrecognized engines of civic engagement and movement building. As filmmaker-serving organizations, they ensure that an abundance of beautiful, nuanced stories get resourced, made, and circulated in their communities and in society more broadly. As trusted conveners and curators, they play an important role in strengthening community cohesion and community wellness, and in supporting political education and political activation. By creating space for artists to be nurtured, they act as drivers of economic and cultural change in their communities. Collectively, these organizations are shifting narratives from the ground up and within and across communities of color, the new American majority. They network filmmakers, exponentiating the power of each filmmaker and film. By connecting these organizations and the networks they serve to one another, Color Congress ensures that they are individually stronger and that their collective power is amplified.

While the documentary form continues to enjoy growing popularity, few independent filmmakers reap the benefits. In a sector that historically has not sufficiently invested in POC voices and leadership, it's not surprising that resources have diminished for organizations that have committed to filmmakers of color and the distribution and impact of their films. In fact, documentary film has been falling through the gaps of philanthropic siloes.

Journalism funders, while acknowledging that documentaries are journalistic, consider them too entertaining or aesthetically focused for portfolios that are mostly dedicated to newsrooms. Culture change funders worry that documentaries don't have enough popular appeal to shift mainstream culture, or cater too much to a particular issue base. Social issue and narrative change funders ask for more evidence of the power of documentary to advance their core issues before considering an investment. As a result, individual filmmakers face an uphill battle each time they approach a funder who is unfamiliar with the power of the documentary form. Arts and humanities funders tend to focus on the performing arts, leaving documentaries to media arts funders. Given that only a handful of foundations are dedicated to funding documentary film, the field faces significant challenges, especially as the commercial market approaches an austerity phase.

FUND

There is an opportunity for the sectors that benefit most from documentary work to invest in our member organizations and the emerging ecosystem in which they can thrive.

The organizations that make up this POC documentary ecosystem need general operating support to continue their vital work and resources for collective experiments with new distribution and funding models. Philanthropy must consider working across silos to invest in and supercharge impact. The more that philanthropy responds to the needs of the ecosystem as Color Congress's seed funders have—The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the Perspective Fund—the stronger this ecosystem will be.

We invite funders and donors to contribute to our unrestricted grant program, or to directly fund these organizations. We also invite funders and donors to contribute to the annual Field Building Fund, or a particular field building priority area.

SUPPORT

While funding this ecosystem is important, it's only one piece of the puzzle.

The vast majority of our artist-run organizations are founder-led. The people who launched them are natural leaders who created the organizations they needed as filmmakers. They are passionate, committed leaders and remain under-compensated. As a result, their organizations navigate financial precarity with tremendous savvy and commitment to the communities they serve.

It's not enough to fund smart, committed, passionate, overworked people without providing the tools, training, and support they need to succeed. We invite funders to proactively look for ways to provide wraparound support for these organizations and their leadership, from communications and fundraising support to management training and transition planning.

Strategies to support these leaders will strengthen the longevity of these organizations and the good work they do.

PROTECT

In the current political climate, comprehensive protection is vital. While the vast majority of our members wish to increase their visibility, doing so amid escalating attacks on "woke" culture and DEIA programs, coupled with a slew of legal challenges following the Supreme Court ruling that struck down affirmative action, makes them especially vulnerable. And yet due to their focus on discrete identity or particular geographical communities, these organizations have remained somewhat invisible to philanthropy. The documentary field must now contend with a new tension between elevating organizations that were not historically visible to philanthropy, and the increasing political and legal vulnerability their newfound visibility introduces.

That these organizations and approaches--to educate or provide frameworks for understanding the present or to build the power of people who experience marginalization--are targeted or considered a threat, suggests their implied power. When the status quo that only serves a few begins to shift, the response will inevitably be swift and hard. In that moment, we must double down on those strategies and approaches, and protect the brave leaders and successful organizations that have quietly worked in the background, guiding the way.

We propose the formation of a working group of donors across racial justice, arts and culture, narrative change, and media and journalism to collaborate with us to map out a coordinated way to defend the ecosystem.



**THE POWER OF THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT
MAKE UP THE ECOSYSTEM AND THEIR UNTAPPED
POTENTIAL ARE OUR NORTH STAR. WE INVITE
OUR PARTNERS IN PHILANTHROPY AND ALLIED
SECTORS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE POWERFUL
ECOSYSTEM WE SUPPORT. AND WE INVITE YOU
TO JOIN US IN FUNDING, SUPPORTING, AND
PROTECTING THIS POWERFUL ECOSYSTEM.**

MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY

Below you will find a full list of the organizations that make up our membership. To request access to our member directory, which provides additional details about our members, please complete [this form](#). In an abundance of caution, the directory will be password protected.

[African American Women in Cinema](#)

[African Film Festival, Inc. \(AFF\)](#)

[American Documentary - POV](#)

[Arab Film and Media Institute](#)

[Arkansas Soul Media](#)

[ArteEast](#)

[Asian American Documentary Network \(A-Doc\)](#)

[Association of Puerto Rican Documentary Filmmakers \(ADocPR\)](#)

[Audaz Entertainment \(Black Muslim Girl Fly\)](#)

[Austin Asian American Film Festival](#)

[AXS Lab](#)

[Beyond Inclusion](#)

[BIPOC Doc Editors](#)

[Bitchitra Collective: Indian Women in Documentary](#)

[Black Association of Documentary Filmmakers West \(BADWEST\)](#)

[Black Documentary Collective](#)

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[Undocumented Filmmakers Collective](#)

[Urban Scholar Film Academy](#)

[Vision Maker Media](#)

[Visual Communications](#)

[Watsonville Film Festival](#)

[Youth FX](#)

RESOURCES

1. [Beyond Inclusion: The Critical Role of People of Color in the U.S. Documentary Ecosystem](#)
2. [The Lens Reflected What Stories & Storytellers Get the Green Light in Documentary's Streaming Age?](#)
3. [White, Male Directors Dominated Early Documentary Streaming Era, Study Finds](#)
4. [Color Congress Announces \\$1.35 Million in Inaugural Grants to 17 People of Color-Led and Serving Doc Organizations](#)
5. [The Evolution of Impact: The Future of Social Change and Nonfiction Storytelling](#)
6. [Documentary, In Color](#)
7. [A Generational Investment in Filmmakers of Color](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Beyond Inclusion: The Critical Role of People of Color in the US Documentary Ecosystem, The Ford Foundation, Sahar Driver, September 2020
- 2 Deep Disparities Persist in Finances of Nonprofits Led by White People and People of Color, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, Dan Parks, June 8, 2022
- 3 This estimate is an extrapolation based on the 63% of our members who responded to our member survey by November 2023. Note the actual raw data (i.e. not extrapolated number) showed an audience reach of 13.2M. Also note that the public media entities in our ecosystem are outliers for vastly higher audience reach than the rest of our members (for example a single public media organization reached 4,000,300 audience members through their television, streaming and online broadcasts). Therefore the audience reach extrapolation uses a unique average for each set (the public media set and the rest). Finally, note the filmmakers served number may include overlap among filmmakers served by multiple organizations. This endnote has been corrected from a previous version.
- 4 Living With Pocket Change: What It Means To Do More With Less, Ms. Foundation for Women, 2020
- 5 Race to Lead: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector, The building Movement Project, 2023
- 6 Lessons on Leadership and Community from 25 Leaders of Color by Darren Isom, Cora Daniels, and Britt Savage, September 15, 2022
- 7 The member-directed Field Building Fund is a Color Congress program with an annual fund of \$300-500k that resources the collective needs and ambitions of members. Half of our meetup conversations this year were dedicated to a collective decision-making process to determine the focus of the annual Field Building Fund and help members gain clarity on one another's work, on their political and economic needs and priorities, and to work through differences and advance solutions that benefit the whole.
- 8 Fundraising and infrastructure development: 17 organizations were trained
- 9 Organizational strategic planning: 13 organizations received
- 10 Impact communications and reporting: 13 organizations received this support
- 11 Financial planning: 10 organizations were trained
- 12 Management training: 9 organizations were able to offer this to select staff
- 13 Online accessibility training and website audits: 9 organizations received this support
- 14 Social movements or organizing for change: 8 organizations were trained
- 15 PR and Marketing communications: 8 organizations received this support
- 16 Strategic communications: 9 organizations received this support
- 17 Leadership training: 7 organizations were able to offer this to select staff
- 18 Ongoing legal support: 5 organizations received this support
- 19 Restorative justice and conflict management: 3 organizations were trained in this
- 20 National board training: 1 organization was able to participate in this
- 21 Member organizations, each represented by one voting member, participated in a real-time vote, followed by a consent-based Collective Decision Making Model that allows space to discuss and address concerns that arise. In other words, we did not seek a simple majority or consensus vote, but rather we take a vote then use the gradients of agreement to gauge consent to proceed with the idea that gets the most votes.

CREDITS

Sonya Childress is a veteran cultural strategist who believes in the transformative power of film. As Senior Fellow with the Perspective Fund, she supported projects that moved the documentary field towards equity and transparency. She spent two decades leading impact campaigns and distribution strategies at Active Voice, California Newsreel and Firelight Media, where she piloted a fellowship for impact producers of color. She is a board member of the Center for Cultural Power, a founding member of the Documentary Accountability Working Group, a working group member for 'The Lens Reflected' study, a 2015 Rockwood JustFilms Fellow, and a recipient of the 2022 Leading Light Award from DOC NYC, and a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences . Sonya is a Los Angeles native of Puerto Rican/ African American descent, and a proud mother of two.

Sahar Driver is a veteran documentary impact strategist, field builder, and researcher. Her career has focused on social and cultural transformation through nonfiction storytelling. She has led impact campaigns and strategy for over two-dozen documentaries, independently and with Active Voice. She has designed and led impact trainings and grantmaking programs to support impact producers and filmmakers of color with Firelight Media. She worked with Doc Society to update the second edition of their Impact Field Guide and wrote the 2019 Impact Hi5 case studies. She is on the Picture Motion Advisory Board, was a 2022 Intercultural Leadership Institute Fellow, and a 2021 Rockwood/JustFilms Fellow. In 2020 she authored the Ford Foundation commissioned report, Beyond Inclusion: The Critical Role of People of Color in the U.S. Documentary Ecosystem. Sahar is a second generation, Iranian American living in Oakland, CA on unceded Muwekma and Ohlone land.

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